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Vendetta diplomacy

Moammar Khadafy's penchant for killing Libyans who oppose him has made many of his countrymen regard him as a gangster in power. The colonel's habit of invading or destabilizing his neighbors has contributed to his regional reputation as an irresponsible troublemaker who has given a bad name to Arab nationalism, socialism and Islam.

Yet even Khadafy's enemies in the Arab world or Africa might have qualms about the disclosure of a US effort to murder Khadafy during the bombing of Libya last April. As recounted by Seymour Hersh in Sunday's New York Times, a small group in the National Security Council, including some of the officials responsible for arms shipments to Ayatollah Khomeini, plotted the bombing as a disguised assassination, even making a conscious effort to kill members of Khadafy's family.

The article - an account distilled from interviews with more than 70 officials and former officials in the White House, the NSC, the State Department, the CIA and the Pentagon - makes the conduct of American foreign policy look like the prosecution of a gang war, or like

one of those bloody vendettas that define the anarchy of Beirut.

Hersh reports that CIA Director William Casey and the band of NSC officials fed a hesitant President Reagan intelligence data that was misleading or fabricated, so that he would authorize an assassination from the air. The masterminds of such an operation not only perverted the role of intelligence-gathering; they treated the president as though he were the pawn of a junta in a banana republic, and lowered the United States to the moral level of a terrorist cell.

It is a sign of incompetence and irrationality that the same officials were shipping missiles and spare parts to the Khomeini regime while making Khadafy's tent a bombing target. The intelligence linking Khomeini to the killing of 241 Marines in Beirut was more credible than intercepted messages linking Khadafy to the bombing of a discotheque in West Berlin.

Foreign policy cannot always be both moral and competent; it should never be both immoral and incompetent.